

The battle over Europe

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It is all too tempting to start an article about Greece with a classical reference. The Melian dialogue comes to mind if one wants to discredit the position of the Troika; Pyrrhus's victory if one wants to stress the heroic efforts of an ultimately defeated Greek power. The closest historical analogy would probably be the Greek revolution against the Bavarian King Otto I in 1862 after his autocratic social and bureaucratic reforms had failed and the country was stuck in clientelism and huge public debts. However, even though historical lessons are happily invoked by political analysts to bolster their case, there is in any case one decisive difference: Greece today is not coming out of a civil war, there are no free-ranging soldiers to deal with, the civilised world is not at the brink of turning into a totalitarian system, and there has been no natural catastrophe. It is just an 'ordinary' crisis, a humanitarian crisis nevertheless. Yet there is something to learn, though it is neither a historical nor theoretical lesson.

In the Anglophone press and in some intellectual circles there appears to be a broad alliance favouring an "end to austerity" and supporting the demands of the Syriza. It ranges from economists ([Krugman](#), [Stiglitz](#)) through political philosophers ([Habermas](#), [Sen](#)) to pop-intellectuals ([Zizek](#), [Chomsky](#)). Usually some economic arguments are combined with normative claims about democracy or dignity, which is then inevitably sprinkled with a bit of Merkel/Schäuble bashing. What all these positions share is that they treat the crisis as a matter of theoretical dispute. If only the correct economic or philosophical view would prevail the appropriate course of action would be clear. The problem with this way of argumentation is that the other side is usually either depicted as unreasonable or immoral. The term 'neoliberal' captures both and one is never quite sure what its proponents are. Are they silly or simply evil? In either case argumentation does not appear to be a promising strategy.

So the first point to realise is that for each claim, one can make a theoretical counter claim. One can say that austerity didn't work. That's true by definition as austerity is not an analytical but a pejorative concept. In fact, every measure taken by the Troika included ways to further growth. The only thing they did not want was to throw good money after bad, i.e. building more dysfunctional apartment complexes in Spain or creating more government 'jobs' in Greece. Thus economists are divided about the right course of action. Likewise normative arguments are not conclusive on their own since both sides can claim 'democratic legitimacy' and to be standing for 'European values'. Interestingly, even the usual last resort for theorists – the flight into the formal or procedural realm – is not a safe haven as lawyers and politicians have shown us how even procedural requirements or the rule of law can be bent and blurred in the course of European negotiations. Thus the crisis is not a matter of insight vs. stubbornness or universal values vs. egoistic interests but a theoretical antinomy.

The second and more important point to realise is that we have now reached a political moment where timing and appearance become crucial. At this point theories don't help much as they necessitate time: time to convince others, time to test out consequences and to build up resources or institutions – time that is lacking. Of course, theorising will continue and later on every event or action will be judged and assessed according to whatever theory one favours. However, right now we are in a different mode for which the appropriate theoretical language is nearly lacking. Maybe the best comparison is the buildup of tensions and ultimate deployment of troops in a war. Whether other European parliaments will approve a further assistance program, whether a bank run or the Grexit can be avoided, whether Russia keeps a low profile – everything will depend on decisions, symbolic actions, or bluffs within the next few days. Like in a war with several fronts in precarious terrain and shaky weather, few things can be predicted with certainty. This is a situation where all theories or plans come to an end, and that is of course difficult to accept for theorists. (That is also the reason why in former times politicians used to study not theories but histories and memories of military leaders and why generals, when they were defeated, pondered about their decisive battles again and again.)

Luckily the events in the next few days, whatever the outcome will be, will not amount to a decisive battle for civilisation, not even for Europe or Greece: more situations like this are likely to come and we will – we hope – at least be spared from the calamities of real wars. Nevertheless, the current situation might help to remind us, the theorists, that in the course of actions we can only watch and sometimes, like when Hegel saw Napoleon, get a

glimpse of world history. It might also remind us that before *theoria* was invented as an eternal idea a different, more mundane view reigned: Heraclitus's reflection of *polemos* (war, fight, struggle) as the father of all things. "Struggle though is the producer of all things, is also the preserver, it shows some as gods, some as men, it makes some servants and others masters." The only question is: who will turn out to be the master and who the servant?

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